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Epiphany 1 – Matthew 3:13-17 – Double Righteousness

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Isn't it so satisfying to hear you're the right person for the job? It's great to get a pat on the back for a job well done, it's great to be appreciated for what you do, and it's great to get a vote of confidence for what still lies ahead of you. Part of work and part of life that makes what we do enjoyable and fulfilling is knowing that the people around you have your back.

Everyone loves to hear a good endorsement from their co-workers and everyone loves to get the stamp of approval from their higher-ups. It validates that what you're doing is good and appreciated and productive. And the same goes for Jesus here too. In fact, in our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus gets the greatest endorsement ever given – both from John the Baptist, as well as even in amazing and miraculous ways from the Holy Spirit and God the Father. But really Jesus didn't need this endorsement for his own confidence and self-esteem like we do. Jesus actually needed this endorsement probably more for our sake, for *our* confidence in *him*, so that we can be sure of his *double* righteousness that on the one hand does what's right before God, and on the other hand makes us right with God. Because Jesus perfectly fulfilled this double righteousness like no one else could, we can be absolutely sure that he is the Messiah – the Anointed One, our Savior – and that now we also are truly God's beloved children.

So our story picks up with John the Baptist in a bit of an awkward situation. We're told that at this time his ministry is thriving and everybody's coming from all over the place to hear him preach and to be baptized by him in the Jordan River. Business was booming, until one day his mission as the forerunner to the coming Savior came to its climax: Jesus came from Galilee to be baptized.

By all accounts this should have been a glorious day; John's work was done, his mission was complete, the Savior was here for all to see! But then Jesus wanted something that apparently put John in a real moral dilemma. See, John was sent by God to administer a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Sinners would come to him needing forgiveness, they would repent of their sins, and through that washing of baptism their hearts would be cleansed. But now here someone came to him who didn't actually need to repent. He was sinless, he was already pure and holy, just like baptism was meant to make him.

And not only that, but do you remember what John had said about that Savior to come? “*I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire*”

(Matthew 3:11). So maybe you can understand why John objected when Jesus asked to be baptized by him. Something about this seemed very backward in John's mind and very definitely offended his sensibilities. John must have thought, “Jesus, what I have to offer isn't meant for you. You are perfect and holy, and you want me to baptize you as if you're not? What's that going to tell people? No, you don't need my baptism of repentance for forgiveness; I need your baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire!”

But then Jesus said something that silenced any objection John had: “*Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.*” John was right about Jesus. He was *that* great; he was perfect and holy; for thirty years of his life he had never committed a single sin. He was righteous in every one of his thoughts, words, and actions, but he came to John to *fulfill all* righteousness, he said. See, Jesus came into this world and he went to the Jordan that day to be our substitute, to walk in our shoes, to do all the things right that we did wrong. So since God wants his people to be baptized and to have the pledge of their sins forgiven, Jesus needed to be baptized too. He came to the Jordan River that day to identify with us completely and to show that even down to the minutest detail, he was intent on keeping all of God's Law for us and doing what is right in our place.

So when John realized what was going on here, he consented to baptizing Jesus. He recognized that by doing this he was putting the finishing touches on his own mission of Forerunner and Baptizer, and passing the torch to Jesus.

Jesus' baptism was the official beginning of his public ministry, when he would in earnest begin teaching and preaching and doing all the things God's Messiah needed to do in order to take away the sins of the world and bring salvation to God's people. He fulfilled the righteousness that does what's right in God's sight – he was perfectly righteous in every way in our place, and his heavenly Father proved it. That day as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens tore open and the Father rang out, “*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.*” Just in case anyone still had any lingering doubts about Jesus and whether he was really the right man for the job of providing salvation for this world, God the Father put those doubts to rest. This was the Father's seal of approval on Jesus and his work. This kind of endorsement could never be said of anyone else but Jesus. He was the perfect Son of God who earned the Father's approval and who really did have what it takes to be our Savior.

And again, that's really an endorsement that means much more to us than to Jesus, because it's us who so often fall prey to questions and doubts and fears. I mean, have you ever wished that just once God would come to you personally and just tell you what's really good and right and true for your life and what his plans for you are? Well here it is. God broke into this world with his thundering approval of his Son and our Savior so that you can know with

absolute certainty that Jesus succeeded in every way that you fall short, that every failure you've ever had Jesus has done away with, and that Jesus is most certainly worth trusting and following. He is your perfect substitute who came to fulfill all righteousness *for you*, who came to do everything right *in your place*, and so that means he really is *your* perfect Savior.

But maybe even more important for us than Jesus' righteousness that did what was right before God is his righteousness that makes us right with God. See, that first kind of righteousness, Jesus' personal perfection, meant that the man Jesus earned eternal life in heaven for himself. But it's that second kind of righteousness, that *double* righteousness – that *imputed* righteousness as it's sometimes called that Jesus won for us and credits to us – that means that Jesus also earned eternal life in heaven for us.

See, when Jesus came to John to be baptized, he came to be inseparably linked to us. Since Jesus was our substitute, that means every good thing he did applies to us and every bad thing we've done applies to him. So even though he himself was perfect and holy, he still took all our sins upon himself, and as our sin-bearer, he carried them to the Jordan River that day to be cleansed in baptism. That means for us it's just like the Apostle Paul said in Romans 6: “*Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.*”

Jesus was baptized so that through his death and resurrection the sacrament might have the power to do the same for us spiritually. Jesus brought his holiness to baptism, so that through our baptisms we might receive that holiness from him, along with his blessings of forgiveness, new life, and eternal salvation that come with it. Jesus was baptized to fulfill all righteousness, because through his baptism and then through our baptism, Jesus fixed our sin-broken relationship with God and made us right with him again so that now we can truly be God's own dearly loved children.

And again, there was no clearer, greater endorsement that Jesus could have received than the ones he got from the Holy Spirit and God the Father. When Jesus came up from those waters, the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit came down, landed on Jesus, and remained there with his power. That set him apart as the Chosen Christ, the Anointed One, and it signaled the official beginning of his ministry work. It wasn't oil that would show everyone that Jesus was the promised Messiah, like they used for anointings back in Old Testament times – it was the Holy Spirit coming upon him with a special outpouring of power; it was his authority, his miracles, his determination to complete his mission that would be the signs for

everyone to see that he was truly the God-appointed Messiah who came to save this world from their sins.

This anointing with the Holy Spirit was the beginning of a long, hard public ministry that would end in Jesus' suffering and death. But what kind of a great Messiah comes into this world to be beaten and bloodied and crucified? The same one who came to the Jordan to be baptized like a common sinner, *for us*. The same one who loved us enough to humble himself to save us because he knew we could never do it for ourselves. The same one who came to fulfill all righteousness for us, the double righteousness of doing what's right in our place and making us right with God by faith. And that's exactly why Jesus had to be baptized and suffer and die for our sins and then rise again from the dead victorious, because that's what he had to do to make us right again. He received the special power of the Holy Spirit and the Father rang out from heaven, “*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased,*” so we can know with total certainty that Jesus *was* everything we needed and *did* everything we needed for our salvation. So excited about his plan being set in motion and bursting with love, the heavens couldn't contain the Father's resounding approval for his Son, so he let it loose for all the world to hear. This was the special love of the Father toward his Son who was faithfully, perfectly, and completely accomplishing the work of salvation for which he was sent.

And you know, the Father's love for Jesus that he shared that day was so much greater because he wasn't just doing this for himself; he was doing it all for us and for our salvation, for all the people that God our Father wants to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. Yes, Jesus came to fulfill all righteousness most of all because he was determined to take away our sins, to reconcile us to God forever, and to give us the promise of eternal life in heaven together with him.

So talk about an endorsement, right? It doesn't get any better than this, and that's the way God wanted it. He wanted us to know that Jesus was perfect in fulfilling his *double* righteousness – doing right on the one hand and making right on the other – because that's the only way we can be absolutely sure of our forgiveness and salvation. Because Jesus was baptized for us, our baptisms have the power to wash away our sins and make us heirs of heaven. Because Jesus lived and died for us to fulfill all righteousness, we've been made righteous in God's sight. And because God himself affirmed his absolute approval of Christ and his work, so now that means God is also *your* Father, and he assures you as well, “You are my son, you are my daughter, whom I love; with *you* I am well pleased.” Amen.